

Humour in the Best of All Possible Worlds – Writing and Directing for Film Comedy

Exploring craft of making the comic in the independent short

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1.

Introduction

This graduating work consists of two parts: a short fiction comedy film, *The Good Cop*, which I have written and directed, and this thesis.

The work aims to answer the question of how to write and direct for a short comedy film, particularly within the common constraints hamstringing the novice film-maker, namely a lack of funding, resources and time.

I will do this by, first of all, looking at what short film comedy is and then, more specifically, what certain theorists have to say on writing and directing film comedy whilst at the same time overlaying my own experiences from my own short film project. I hope to expand on those ideas, test them and even add to them.

I feel it is important to deal with this subject because at its heart, comedy is a noble art form capable of delivering pure entertainment, escapism and shedding light on fundamental truths about the world around us and the human condition.

My origins in comedy

Growing up in Scotland in the 1980s, the advent of the VCR meant that film watching with the whole family from the comfort of your living room was a regularly accessible and enjoyable pastime. Thinking back, it was at that young age that I developed my taste in movies. Other children might have delighted in the horror of *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) or the sensational action of the ultra-violent *Robocop* (1987), but for me, still basking in the golden glow of Hollywood; it was those friendly, innocent, family comedies that really captured my imagination. If a film had Steve Martin, Chevy Chase, Bill Murray or John Candy in it, I was halfway to the video store already¹.

¹ Stand out films from that period for me include *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation* (1989), *!Three Amigos!* (1986), *Planes, Trains & Automobiles* (1987) and *Groundhog Day* (1993).

Those films represented to me an absolute kind of pleasure. They were an escape from reality into a world of well-intentioned adults, trying with sincerity to be the best they can in troubling circumstances. Being American and aimed at as wide an audience as possible, they were dripping with morality lessons. What I took from those films in terms of how to live my life is hard to measure, but one thing I know I kept and have carried with me since is a love for film comedy.



Groundhog Day (1993)

None of those films I loved garnered awards at prestigious ceremonies. If you pick up the DVDs now, you'll find nothing about being nominated for so many Oscars to recommend them. The glory in comedy comes from simply making people laugh.

Just as the functions and forms of comedy evolve through time, so my taste has done, too. I grew up in the shadow of Edinburgh which hosts the largest performing arts festival in the world, including, outside of maybe Montreal, the largest comedy festival. Every August, stand-up comics from all over the English speaking world would descend on the old town to ply their trade. Early teenage years were dominated by a love of this art. In that slippery area between observational and alternative comedy, I found a place I felt welcome. I understood instinctively that these people were trying to do something profound: to make us laugh.

As I grew older, it became apparent that the laughter was even more rewarding when it was also designed to make the audience think. Jokes are at their best when they can perform the double trick of both making one chortle and cause a shift in consciousness to open up new angles and ways of thinking about the world.

One of my favourite stand-up jokes²² comes from the British comic Jimmy Carr:

I've got a friend whose nickname is 'Shagger'.

You might think, 'That's pretty cool.'

She doesn't like it.

It's funny because it plays on the expectations of the audience that the friend is male and then we think that he must be very proud of that nickname, knowing what we do about the nature of the modern male.

But when we learn that the friend is female and that she doesn't like the nickname, it reveals two things: firstly that we were wrong in our first assumption and then that we, as a society, are guilty of double standards in our view of how we understand the very same action from a man or a woman. What is something to be celebrated in men is something to be abhorred in women.

Jimmy Carr's delivery, the simplicity and efficiency of the joke and the saucy subject nature are contributing factors to its success. But those things aside, the joke still works.

So I grew up and grew to love comedy in all its forms and for all the artfulness to be found in there. But I'm no stand-up comic. I graduated in Film & Media and Philosophy at The University of Stirling, Scotland and have since pursued a career in education; teaching specifically scriptwriting and directing acting performance.

This love for comedy and my background in film studies are the two key contributing factors leading me towards this work.

The questions I set myself in this thesis are threefold: What is a short fiction comedy? How ought one to go about writing such a thing? And, once written, how ought one to go about directing the performance of the actors in it?

²² As seen on the UK's Channel 4 show, *100 Best Stand-ups*, broadcast in 2007. Incidentally, Jimmy Carr was placed 12th on that list and has since fallen to 13th spot.

Acknowledgements

There already exists on *The Good Cop* DVD credits a long list of those thanked for their input in the making of the film. It being such a massive undertaking, that list runs into the dozens, so I won't repeat it here. I will, however, mention my producer, Timo Savunen, without whose support I could simply not have made *The Good Cop*.

I would like to further thank The Promotion Centre for Audiovisual Culture, AVEK, who provided financial aid for the scriptwriting stage of the production, as well as Anna Pesonen, Matthew Elton and Joe Davidow for their feedback and encouragement in the scriptwriting process. And lastly, I'd like to thank Marjo Mäenpää, my departmental supervisor for the duration of the whole project.

Thank you all.

2.

What is a short comedy fiction film?

In this section I will break apart and examine the notions of short film and comedy. Then, upon putting those notions back together, I will look at what a short comedy film is and what implications there are for me in how I understand that concept.

The short film

As an art form, the short film is often overlooked within the film industry, frequently regarded as merely a stepping stone to features and most regularly churned out, often with dismal results, by students or first-time film-makers. The problem of dealing with short film misconception can to some degree be solved by reshaping our understanding of what it is for and how it differs in its approach from its bigger cousin, the feature.

Saara Cantell argues that the short film is an art form in itself.³ Cantell draws useful parallels between the short film and the short story. Yes, there are limitations, but only in terms of not being able to do for elaborate narrative structures and character development what a feature can. But why should a short film have to try to do that?

The short film has no business adhering to the same generic groupings as the feature. Whereas in the world of features we might feel the need to pigeonhole in terms of genre, especially to satisfy marketing imperatives, for the short, Cantell argues, such impetus towards those classifications is deleterious.

Cantell believes that the short film form mirrors Zen art: *"...the power of being present, the capacity to tell things mainly through what is left unknown, the tendency to avoid explanations, and sometimes even the use of absurd humour..."*⁴

³ Cantell, 2004

⁴ Cantell, 2004

The short, at its best, can be a cohesive, challenging, enlightening journey focused one specific idea. It can be powerful and meaningful. Brevity only makes those achievements all the more impressive.

The comedy

Nailing down ideas of comedy is a slippery business at the best of times. Henri Bergson regards the comic spirit, *“above all, as a living thing”*⁵, not something to be trapped by definition.

In his work, *Laughter*, Bergson is able to shed light on what makes comedy tick. One key factor is that of community. Bergson paints a picture of a group of people sitting in a restaurant sharing a joke and laughing. A fellow diner sits apart from the laughing group, overhearing what hilarity is making them fall about so. But he doesn’t join in with the laughter himself. Why?

That element of inclusivity is key to understanding how humour works. It is, in effect, a social contract between a group of people. To be outwith that group is to be excluded from the very thing which the comic spirit is referring to: shared values, experiences and ideas.

Simon Critchley, in his book *On Humour*, reports Wittgenstein’s observation in terms of what happens when people don’t share the same sense of humour:

*“What is it like for people to not have the same sense of humour?
They do not react properly to each other. It’s as though there were a
custom amongst certain people for one person to throw another a
ball which he is supposed to catch and throw back; but some people,
instead of throwing it back, put it in their pockets.”*⁶

Humour is all about context. If we don’t share the same frames of reference, how can we find something funny? You won’t find my joke about the Prime Minister funny if you have no ideas about him. You might not even know I’m making a joke.

As I mentioned above, my own background in comedy comes from a British perspective. Yes, there are shared sources on an international scale, such as that love for broadly aimed American movies,

⁵ Bergson, 1900

⁶ Critchley, 2002

but then there's also a peculiarly British slope to what I both find funny and how I myself create the comic.

Critchley defines the British comic tradition as being primarily intellectual and linguistic, as opposed to, for example, the French or Italian, which is more physical.

Revered British stand-up comedian, Stewart Lee, in his detailing of the ascent of the Alternative Comedy scene in the UK from the 80s to the present day pinpoints the changing nature in terms of perception, function and form.⁷ Nevertheless, an element of British comedy tradition which has been around for a long time and still persists is that of the Oxford Revue and Cambridge Footlights⁸. From such a source comes exactly this kind of linguistic, intellectual style people think of when, in Finland, they talk about "British Humour".

Is there, then, a danger that Finnish humour will be so very different to British, so that when I throw the ball, the Finn, instead of returning it, puts it in her pocket? Luckily, a look at the last fifty years of Finnish television broadcasting shows us that the Finns really do appreciate British Humour. From *Monty Python's Flying Circus* to *Little Britain*, there's been an ever present and ever-understanding audience in Finland.

The humour I employ in my short film, *The Good Cop*, is one of incongruity. Later in this thesis I will talk specifically about forms of linguistic humour, but for now I can isolate that element of comedy which I am using as the act of simply turning things a bit upside down for comic effect.

The imbalance between how things ought to be (as we can agree they ought to, given our shared experiences and values) and how they appear in the story is the source of much of the humour. Lassi is a police officer; but he's too nice. Paasila is a police chief; but he's not serious enough, smacking gold balls around the police garage. Sven has run over a dog; he's excited about that fact and a bit upset the dog isn't dead. The farmer has just been told his dog is nearly dead; he's worried about the car that hit it.

This kind of incongruity, I know, works in both Finland and Britain. I pass the ball, I know it's coming back.

⁷ Lee, 2010

⁸ Both of which are an ongoing institution of the British comedy scene and can count such alumni as Peter Cook, Dudley Moore, Rowan Atkinson, Douglas Adams, Stephen Fry, Hugh Laurie and all the Pythons bar Terry Gilliam.

The short comedy film

Comedy in short film form has been around as long as film has. The most popular early silent films featured global superstars of comedy; Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton and Harold Lloyd. Today, those films are seen as pure and artful. Steve Neale outlines the ability of the comic film:

“Encompassing a range of forms, sites and genres (from jokes to intricately plotted narratives, from slapstick to farce, from satire to parody, from shorts and cartoons to features), comedy can also entail an array of defining conventions (from the generation of laughter to the presence of happy endings to the representation of everyday life), and is able in addition to combine with or to parody virtually every other genre or form.”⁹

Neale speaks here of the multitude of sub-genres within comedy as well as the ability to function within other genres. What remains constant is the generic markers such as the generation of laughter.

The use of humour in the short can be for making sharp points where time constraints call for it. In the short, there are significant challenges in terms of hitting home singular points and humour can and does help to meet those challenges.

“The best humour in a short is the type that grows out of the situation, reinforces the conflict or emotion of the characters, or subtly reveals more about the character. It is sometimes funny, sometimes nervous and sometimes empathetic.”¹⁰

⁹ Neale, 2001, p. 66

¹⁰ Sullivan, 2008, p.42

3.

***The Good Cop* production**

The film project, *The Good Cop*, started in early 2011 when I began working on the script. I received funding from AVEK to write and that meant I could concentrate on the story for a concerted period time. Having gone through several drafts until I was happy with the shape of it, I approached Timo Savunen at Villilä Studios, Nakkila about producing the film. After reading the script, and liking it, he agreed to help. Together with his financial backing and abilities in solving practical problems like props, locations, cast and crew, we went into pre-production. In this section I will outline the entire production process, from pre-production through to post-production.

Pre-production

Timo Savunen and I met in August 2011 and set the plan to shoot later that year. My role at the start was to make it clear to Savunen what I was looking to do, how I wanted to work and the overall artistic direction of the piece. I was happy to let Savunen deal with all the financial matters and contracts.

For research purposes, I visited the local police station in Pori and spoke to many people there about the work they do and how they feel about it. That visit proved important in ironing out details of the script in terms of procedures, dialogue, tone and likelihood of certain things happening.¹¹

Crew

I only had two stipulations concerning the crew; that they knew what they were doing and that they were easy to work with. Savunen handled the job of hiring everyone, except the

¹¹ Details such as police officers disagreeing about whether or not to chase after a “speeding” car and the procedure for killing an injured animal were discussed and what ended up in the film bears close resemblance to real world possibilities.

cinematographer, who was the only one specific person I had in mind from the start. That was Peter Salovaara, currently in his second year studying cinematography in Aalto University.

In the end, I knew almost everyone on the crew as they were either current or former students of mine in Nakkila. I was happy with this as it meant there would be a quicker period of finding our working rhythm and also it helped that most of the people knew me in a professional capacity as an audio-visual communications teacher.

Cast

With casting, I again relied on Savunen's know-how to come up with names. This time, however, I had to meet the people personally and get to know them a bit before deciding if I could work with them. Eventually, after a lot of searching, calling, emailing, dead ends and meetings, the cast was assembled.

I held an introductory/read-through session in Anni's in Pori, in early December, 2011, so that everyone could get to know each other a little bit and we could establish a way of working. I let people introduce themselves and laid out a plan for the production.

During that session I spoke about the ideas in the script and where they had come from. I urged everyone to speak about their characters and feel free to express any opinions or ask questions about the writing. It was very productive and, importantly, gave me the confidence to now that I was working with dedicated professionals who were on board with the ideas and ways of working I had proposed.

On the Sunday before shooting began I held proper rehearsals for the three main actors, once more in Anni's. I went through the key scenes with them and did blocking, script analysis and a little improve, some of which made it into the final film. Again, they could see how I worked and I made sure that they were trusted with the characters and I gave them some small adjustments to help bring the characters to life in the right way.

Hair, make up and wardrobe

We had two professionals, Minttu Lilja and Salla Kaipiainen, working in the hair, make up and wardrobe department. I consulted with them on the look of each character, so they had some idea of what I wanted, for example, that the little girl should be in bright colours to separate her from the surroundings and that her father, the farmer, should be as understated as possible, because the actor and his role was already so pronounced. They gave me options and I essentially gave the nod to those which seemed most appropriate for telling the story.



On set, picture by J. Keinonen

Locations

We scouted locations in and around Nakkila in order to make the production base Villilä Studios. In the end, after a lot of good work from chief location scouter, Ilkka Kari, we were able to find exactly the places that the script required. All the while, as each potential place was located, I would be shown the pictures and, if possible, go to scout the locations myself also. It was hardest to secure the police garage and there were suggestions of rewriting to locate somewhere else, but I fought to keep that and eventually we got the use of the garage of the police station in Ulvila.

In the original script I wrote that the police officers spent the first section of the story camped out in a disused petrol station in the middle of nowhere. To my delight, we were able to find exactly what the script called for and within a very reasonable distance from our base in Nakkila.



Film still, *The Good Cop*

Props

By far the hardest prop was the police car. Again, as it seemed harder and harder to get one, it was argued that the policemen could be in an unmarked car, but again, I fought to make sure we had an actual police car. In the end, we got one, but only for a very limited time of three hours on two days¹². Additional prop problems to solve included acquiring a gun, golfing equipment and the advertising board at the start which contained the advert for sausages.

It became increasingly important to have people on board who can solve problems, get results and treat the directions of the script as bible. Isva Isoviita did exactly that and ultimately it is hard to imagine how much more challenging the production would have been had he not been on hand to complete all those little details that I has written into the script.

Cinematography

I met with the cinematographer, Peter Salovaara, on several occasions and we started off by sharing thoughts on the kinds of looks we had in mind. Among the reference points we shared were Roger Deakens' work on M. Night Shayamalan's *The Village* (2004), the works of Roy

¹² The strictness in using the police uniforms and the police car came from the recent shooting incident in Norway and meant we also had to have a real police officer on set whilst the car was in use. Most of the shots of the officers sitting in the car were actually shot in another vehicle with a similar interior.

Andersson¹³ and the Nicholas Cage film, *Weather Man* (2005). We found a colour palate and stillness of shot which would suit the nature of the story.

Following those discussions, I drew up preliminary storyboards for each scene and we used those as a starting point for eventually making shot lists for the actual shooting days.



On set, picture by J. Keinonen

With regards to a more detailed visual style, I find myself in the same camp as David Mamet who has found a smartly curt way of dealing with the issue of where to put the camera.

In his book, *On Directing Film*, Mamet recounts a discussion with a crew member over where to put the camera. “Over there.” is the best answer he can give as all he wants is an “uninflected shot necessary to move the story along.” He is rebuffed: Isn’t the scene about respect, so shouldn’t the camera be at a respectful angle?

“No, there is no such thing as a “respectful angle”. Even if there were, you wouldn’t want to put the camera there – if you did so, you wouldn’t be letting the story evolve. It’s like saying “a naked man is walking down the street copulating with a whore while going to a whorehouse.” Let him get to the whorehouse. Let each shot stand by itself. The answer to the question “Where do you put the camera?” is the answer to the question “What’s the shot of?””¹⁴

¹³ Specifically *Songs from the Second Floor* (2000) and *You, The Living* (2007)

¹⁴ Mamet, 1991, p.72

There's enormous store in what Mamet has to teach us about story telling through film. His main purpose is to tell a story through character action, in the visual medium of film, not by exploring their inner world through, for example, camera angles and lighting. When we understand that it is through action that we get a sense of who someone is, suddenly the camera work doesn't seem so important.

I was always happy to let Salovaara deal with the specifics of the camera technical side and then just make sure that what was needed to tell the story was in the shot and that all the shots were in the can. This left me free to concentrate on getting the right kind of performance out of the actors.

Production

When the time came to shoot the film, I met with Salovaara once more the day before shooting and had a final discussion on the details of the look and rhythm of the cinematography. The principle photography was for four days and each day followed roughly the same pattern:

The night before, I drew up a shot list of all the shots we needed for the scenes that day and then made a shot order, based on the availability of locations, actors, sunlight, the police car and then, finally, considering the relative difficulty of the performance of the actors. For example, it was important to leave enough space at the start of the shooting day to work with Pipsa, the young girl in the film, as it was cold and I needed space to get the right performance out of her.



Film still, *The Good Cop*

Then in the morning, before shooting, I would rehearse with the actors for that day before going to the locations, making final adjustments to their performances.

Then off to the set where we would work very quickly through the shots for the day. Each day was very full and almost no time was allowed for taking a proper break, so there was always coffee and sandwiches available to grab when a spare two minutes came up.

On the set it was my job to:

- keep track of the shots
- make sure the actors were delivering the right lines and with the right performance
- give approval to the cinematographer for the look of each shot, and
- make sure there was a good flow of communication between each department

The shooting days went exceptionally well and everyone worked hard. The weather was regular and there was always a good atmosphere on the set.

Then, at the end of each day's shooting, we packed up our equipment, relocated to Villilä Studios in Nakkila and had lunch. Once everyone was well fed and warmed up, Savunen and I held a debriefing, talking about the day's work and asking if there was any problems or questions about the production so far.

Then I would go off to plan the next day's shot list and shot order.

Post-production

I started with my editor, Einari Vuorinen, by talking about the script and looking at the kinds of pacing and rhythm that came to our minds. We used the graph method suggested by Bruce Block in *Visual Story*¹⁵ for setting out our ideas of pacing; slow at the start, quickening up at certain points. I had some specific thoughts about hitting marks in terms of timing in jokes and other than that, I left him to it. When we had a first cut ready to view, we spent two days going through it shot by shot, scene by scene, again and again until we had something tight and working well enough for both of us.

¹⁵ Block, 2008

As we shot on film and the time was so tight with light, props, locations and actors, we didn't have the luxury of improvising or doing many takes. Often times we had only one take of one angle on an important piece of dialogue, so there was little to play around with in the edit. Furthermore, the story is so straight that it just isn't possible to swap things around or drop them off altogether.

One part which was dropped was the last couple of lines of the first Police Chief scene in his office. It became apparent that when he mentioned about having to make a decision about Lassi, he would be repeating himself later on. So, we just cut out of that right at the moment when he asks Lassi if he is really a policeman.

Ultimately the film length was significantly longer than I had originally imagined, running to approximately 23 minutes as opposed the 15-16 minutes the script suggested.

The sound post production was another process of collaboration, this time with Jani Nikander, the sound recorder and designer. Together we spoke of the ways it can play out, made a plan for the soundscape, ways in which we could bring characters to life more and also audible cues as to what might be happening in the story.

Nikander and I worked with the score composers to set specific instruction about individual character themes and the tones within each scene.

At this stage, I started to feel the film coming together in terms of tone and pacing. We were keen to create a soft/hard comic tone quite far removed from slapstick and not too dark. Then there needed to be enough breathing space to let the characters develop and let the audience ease into the story world. Walter Murch¹⁶ proved an invaluable companion during this process, especially his golden rule of using only three sound elements at one time. That advice was well heeded when it came to setting space and time for dialogue and scene immersion.

¹⁶ Much, 2001

4.

Writing for comedy

“In comedy in particular, script is everything because it’s hard to get a great comedy performance without a good script. In a way, the screenwriter has already done 80% of the creative work of the director.” – Harold Ramis¹⁷

It’s often said that a film is made three times: first in the writing, second in the shooting and third in the editing. That’s three completely different films, but what we end up with is an amalgamation of all three. In this chapter, I want to look at the first part of that process: the writing, and more specifically themes, character, dialogue and implications for writing for comedy.

Main themes of *The Good Cop*

“The same day there was another terrible earthquake. Horrified, dumbfounded, bewildered, bleeding and gasping, Candide asked himself: ‘If this is the best of all possible worlds, what can the others be like?’”
- Voltaire, *Candide*¹⁸

It’s not enough that a comedy be simply funny. Nothing is funny in and of itself. There needs to be context for the comical content to come through. The best comedy has to be about serious subjects. There must be drama in there, too.

If one considers a typical television sitcom like *Friends* (1994 – 2004), there is a strong conclusion to be drawn about the nature of the subject matter at hand. The jokes come thick and fast and we love to see those characters go about their lives in such kooky and predictably slipshod ways. But what the characters themselves are dealing with on a week to week basis parallels the subject matter of any tragedy.

¹⁷ From interview featured in makingof.com in 2010, where he is talking about directing comedy.

¹⁸ Voltaire, 1759, P. 16

A typical episode would see Chandler and co deal with confronting estranged parents, infidelity, financial predicaments, commitment fears, unplanned pregnancy and difficult career choices, to name just a few.

Granted, there are other darker storylines which are not present, such as for example rape, drug use, racism and murder. If those subject are ever broached it is in a very swift way and not in any depth.

That doesn't mean that the drama elements which are present are any less worthy. It could be argued that the problems the characters in *Friends* are dealing with are more relevant to the average viewer than those missing ones as they are the kinds of things the viewer will more likely have experience in dealing with themselves.

For my story, I focused on two key themes to hang the comedy off: Emotional Labour and Panglossian Positivity.

Emotional Labour

When a person has to perform manual tasks at work, such as moving furniture or cutting wood, we call that physical labour. That's the kind of thing that people have to do all the time at work. In every job, there is a physical element, even if it simply having to sit at a desk and type into a computer all day. Our ability to do those physical labour tasks at work depends on our physical capabilities. Someone with poor upper body strength would struggle to work as a furniture mover and someone with a bad back might struggle sitting at a desk all day. We can say that those people are not physically fit to do their job.

In the same way, it is also demanded that we do emotional lifting at work. In every job there is a certain amount of emotional labour that is required in interaction with colleagues and customers, or being creative.

Some jobs require substantially more of that than others. A nurse, for example, is required to perform many tasks aside from administering drugs and changing bedpans. He must also develop and exercise certain emotional muscles in the area of kindness, understanding, caring, and so on

when dealing with patients. That bedside manner is a key part of the job and some people are going to be better equipped for that emotional heavy lifting than others.

I became interested in finding out more about this topic having lived in Finland for so long and still retaining the same expectations of customer service that I had whilst in Britain. It has been a common experience for me to confront poor customer service and my response to that has evolved to the point where I understand that the person doing the job just isn't capable.

Panglossian Positivity

I read Voltaire's classic novel, *Candide*¹⁹, when at university and it has stayed with me ever since. In this book, Voltaire skewers the kind of positivism that tends to look on all things as being "*for the best, in the best of all possible worlds.*" The eponymous hero of the story is the earnest Candide who, whilst under the tutelage of his professor, Dr. Pangloss, is taught just this very idea.

The idea itself comes from a theological stand point and draws upon the notion that everything in the world has been created with purpose and for the best.

Problems with the theological aspects aside, Voltaire impresses on his reader the ludicrousness of this way of thinking. He shows us that sometimes things are just plain awful and we would do well to accept that fact.

I found myself having sympathy with Dr. Pangloss's position. There must be, I find myself thinking, a kind of compatibilism whereby we can both accept that sometimes things are bad, but that they are also just that way and so, therefor, not capable of being better.

I find comfort in the notion of acceptance of situations without regret. I don't think one should stop trying to make things better, that's every person's duty, but one should also learn to accept the world as it is without being disproportionately angry at that fact.

¹⁹ Voltaire, 1759

Events

Having already decided on my themes, I started thinking about story events. Stories need characters with goals and conflicts in order for them to be stories. The most basic description of story is said to be 'a character wants something badly and is having trouble getting it.' Robert McKee talks in his book, *Story*, about the Principle of Antagonism:

*"A protagonist and his story can only be as intellectually fascinating and emotionally compelling as the forces of antagonism make them."*²⁰

What McKee wants us to realize here is that nobody is going to care about the events of the story if there's nothing stopping things from going smoothly. If I tell you a story of how I went to the shop to buy bananas and then, when I got there, I bought the bananas, your response is going to be "So what?" There has to be something causing friction for us to care about the characters and what they're trying to do.

To this end, I endeavoured to provide my characters with enough ammunition to make things challenging for them. Nothing should be easy for them, there should always be an element of challenge in what they are doing.

Character

Chris Vogler, in his book *The Writer's Journey*, looks into the character archetypes which populate the traditional narrative form²¹. In among the classic types of Hero, Mentor and Shadow, he also singles out the Trickster as one who, among other things, brings comic relief to the story.

How much and in what way is this archetype needed in the comedy film? Or, possibly a more useful way to phrase that question is to ask, how far does an understanding of the Trickster type help us in understanding the comic story?

The comic differs from the tragic in that the main thrust is to engender humour. Whereas the tragic *may* benefit from some light relief from the otherwise seriousness of the story events; the

²⁰ McKee, 1999, p 317

²¹ Vogler, 2007

comic absolutely demands significantly more of that lightness and at a much higher frequency. Here then, the Trickster role is not so easy to define. In essence, it must be present throughout and in many guises.

I wrote the characters in *The Good Cop* with a specific aim that they all have potential to provide the comic. Lassi is comically overly positive, Otto is comically overly cynical, Chief Paasila is comically eccentric given his senior position in the police force. Each primary player has the inbuilt comedy that Bergson refers to in his treatise *Laughter*²². The comic, he argues, comes from inelasticity, which is to say that quality of character which carries on regardless in the face of worldly evidence which would suggest a change might be in order.

The short film format is especially suited to this kind of comical inelasticity of character in that things are funnier when they do not change. One can argue that there ought to be a character arc (learning and growth) in a film narrative, but the short format doesn't allow such a luxury. Over two hours, we might allow our hero to change, but over fifteen minutes, there's only so much that can happen. Indeed, unless the film is singularly concerned with a specific change in one character, it might just not fit at all.

None of the characters in *The Good Cop* really change. If anything, the sense that any of them might do so is pulled back at the end and we are left with the status quo of character traits we found at the start. Lassi retains his optimism, Otto retains his cynicism and Chief Paasila is left having, ultimately, had his methods validated by Lassi's attempt to kill the dog.

Dialogue

In Bergson's discussion on the comic in speech, he outlines two ways in which that comic spirit can manifest. There is a distinction to be made between that which is funny because of *what* is being expressed and that which is funny because of *how* it is being expressed. This latter comedy, from the way that words sound, for example through the very British method of joking with puns is generally speaking, fixed in its own language and not translatable into another.

²² Bergson, 1900

Q: Why was Six afraid of Seven?

A: I don't know, why was Six afraid of Seven?

Q: Because Seven eight (ate) Nine.

That only works in English as the words 'eight' and the past simple form of the verb to eat, 'ate', sound exactly the same.

Two snowmen are standing in a field.

One turns to the other and asks 'Can you smell carrots?'

This joke, on the other hand, regardless of whether you find it funny, works just as well in any language.

The challenge for me, then, in working with a second language, has been to create the comic through situations and dialogue free from puns and other speech specific issues which cannot carry into another language. I wrote the original script in English and had most of the dialogue translated, rendering any attempt at such humour obsolete.

Just then the girl's FATHER comes to the door. Shirtless, but with enough dirt to suggest his work as a farmer.

PEKKA

Hm?

MARIA

These policemen are asking about
Seven.

Lassi looks at his watch.

MARIA

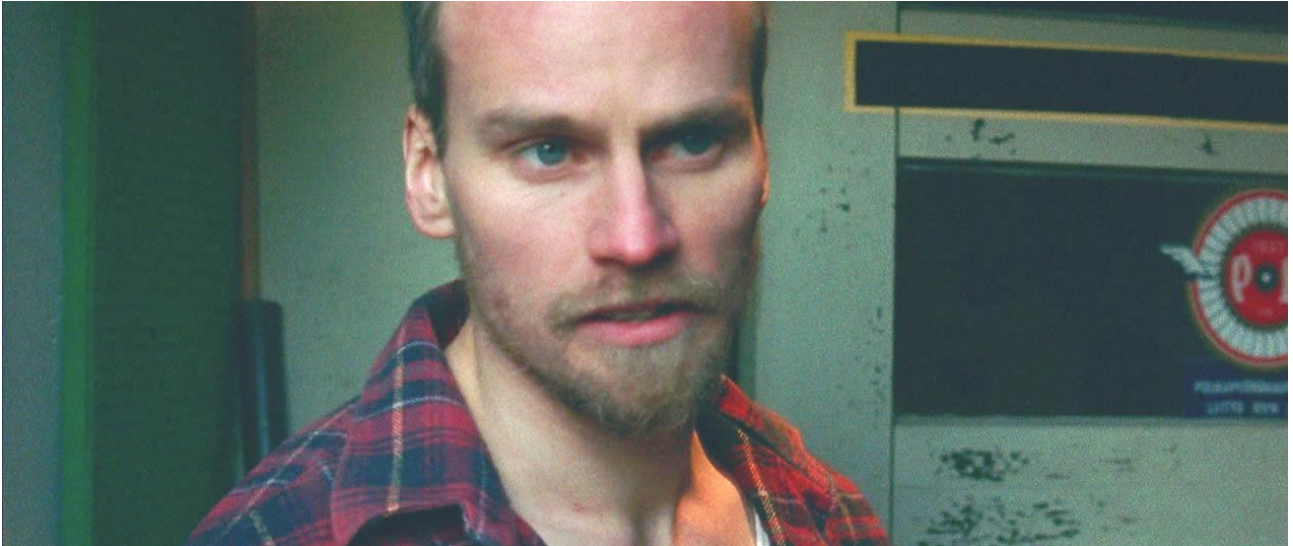
That's the name of our dog. You
didn't know that!

LASSI

Seven.

PEKKA

We live next to the road.



Film still, *The Good Cop*

It is of no little significance that as my own linguistic ability in Finnish improves, I find myself, much to my own dismay, still unable to communicate to the extent that I would like. I can say that after ten years of living in Finland, my Finnish language is still quite some distance from being acceptably good by my own standards. Why? Simply because I cannot make jokes in Finnish anywhere near how I can and do in English.

It is a comedy?

"In comedy, laughter settles all arguments" -Robert McKee²³

Robert McKee presents the idea that the comedy writer is an angry idealist who is unhappy at the ways of the world and uses comedy to balance things out. *"Comedy is at heart, an angry, antisocial art. To solve the problem of weak comedy, therefore, the writer first asks: What am I angry about?"²⁴*

A question arises from this. Do I see myself in this description? Am I angry? If I am, and I don't yet know that I really am, then what would I be angry about? The police? No. Farmers who have little respect for their pets? No.

²³ McKee, 1999, p. 361

²⁴ McKee, 1999, p. 360

If I have to pinpoint something, it is that the world is, in itself, a cynical place. I am angry that it is expected of us, as we function in normal civilized society, to be cynical or nasty to one another, to take the view that bad things have to happen as that's the way of the world. I don't think things change when we accept that way of thinking. I don't want to subscribe to a view of life that tells us to get in line and do things like others, even if we all agree it's not much fun.

All good and well, but McKee, once he's isolated the angry comic writer, sets out a tough task for him to retain that title. McKee argues that one is only actually writing comedy if in merely telling the most basic plot, the listener will end up "rolling on the floor" laughing. If that doesn't happen, the writer hasn't written a comedy, they've written... something else. A dramedy? A crimedey? Or some kind of genre hybrid which features, one hopes, comic elements in the telling.

I'm a little skeptical here as to the verifiability of McKee's claim. His style is to propose hard and fast rules in order to make a solid point. And it's a good point to make. 'Want to write something funny?' he asks, 'Then write something funny. Not something that a funny person can make funny, but something that is funny in and of itself.' But surely it's not possible to communicate even the most basic plot points without use of language, which will allow for personality and humour to come through.

Comic design in narrative

*"In drama, the audience continually grabs handfuls of the future, pulling themselves through, wanting to know the outcome. But Comedy allows the writer to halt Narrative Drive, the forward projecting mind of the audience, and interpolate into the telling a scene with no story purpose. It's there just for the yuks."*²⁵

I'm not sure short film allows this kind of blatant disregard for narrative drive that feature film does. In my case, I allowed myself more freedom to allow characters to simply be funny. Sven the Swede is a point in case. I wrote for Sven an extended dialogue which brought his character and the comic implications of it fully to life. His purpose was still to move forward narrative, but he

²⁵ McKee, 1999, p. 361

gets proportionally more screen time for the duel reason that he is funny and also that he is important in the story later on.

Every scene in *The Good Cop* has narrative purpose, but dialogue can be treated differently. I know that something has to happen in terms of story momentum, but I also have a duty to the audience and the characters to let it happen in a way that is engaging, funny and gives the characters depth.

A.S. Horton²⁶ makes a telling observation about the nature of comedy. Here, there's a distinction to be made within certain types of comic films: those that place jokes in the foreground and narrative in the background, as in a Marx Brother film, and those which reverse this model, placing narrative in the foreground and the jokes in the background.

I regard this is a sliding scale, upon which any film can be positioned according to the significance placed on either the narrative or the gags. But always, in any comedy, there has to be both of these things present.

The Good Cop falls significantly further along that comedy scale towards the end of narrative importance, but I'm happy with that and it gets me off McKee's charge of not writing a comedy.

²⁶ Horton, 1991, p.7

5.

Directing comedy performance

“Don’t try to be funny.” - Martin Scorsese²⁷

In this section I will look at how it has been suggested one ought to deal generally with directing performance, then more specifically comedic style, and measure those ideas against my own experiences in the production of *The Good Cop*.

As stated above, my aim has always been to focus on working with the actors. A certain amount of input has to go into decisions regarding setting, lighting, camera, sound, editing, etc. But for me, the difference between a good and bad film is very simple. A good script (40%), good performances (40%) and competent technical work (20%) and you have a good film. It’s hard for me to be interested beyond a passing moment in a film if it is beautifully made, but lacking in script and performance.

My job as a film-maker, as I see it, has always been to get the script right, get the performances right and then make sure I have the right people around me to ensure the rest of the technical elements are all fine. If the cinematography or the props or the sound design are exceptional, that’s a bonus, but they aren’t going to mean much if they are not supporting the narrative of an interesting, well-played story.

Casting

In casting *The Good Cop* I had to rely on Timo Savunen’s instincts and connection for who might be good for any given role. The priority for me was to have the right ones in place for the main roles, namely Lassi, Otto and the Chief.

The auditioning process extended as far as making an initial approach for an actor to see if they would be interested in reading the script and then if they are available for the time we planned to

²⁷ Anecdote told in Weston’s *The Film Director’s Intuition*, 2003, recounting the direction Scorsese gave Paul Newman on the set of *The Color of Money*.

shoot. On a creative and practical level, those two criteria have to be met from the start. Then, I sent them the script and invited them to meet and talk about their character, the story and what ideas they had.

Everything happens in that meeting. Do I like them, do they like me, do they like the script, do we trust each other? If the answer to all those questions is 'yes', we move forward.

The hardest part to cast was that of the small girl. I initially met with a group of young actors who belonged to a theatre group in Pori, but none of them fit exactly into the right age bracket. Also, they had that look of eagerness which one can find in a young person keen on acting. I felt from the start that I needed someone who was younger (much more vulnerable) and was not going to act with a capital A. Eventually, we found Pipsa Kivi, who whilst only seven years old, held those precious qualities I was looking for: openness, patience and able to sit with a group of adults and not be left out.



On set, picture by J. Keinonen

Another significant aspect of the casting of any film is that people look the part. Ville Kiljunen absolutely looks like the Lassi from the script: earnest, upbeat and enthusiastic. Jarno Mailinen fits the bill of Otto, Lassi's partner: slightly schlubby and overly worried. Matti Mäntylä steps right off the page as Chief Paasila: Paternal, extrovert and determined.

Rehearsals

Once all the principal actors were in place, I held two key rehearsal sessions. The first, with all actors present, was simply to allow everyone to get to know one another and for me to put forward the methods of working I favoured and give the opportunity to talk about the script and the characters.

The second rehearsal-proper was with only the three main actors, Ville Kiljunen, Jarno Maline and Matti Mäntylä. There we took the time to go through each key scene with them, without scripts in hand at the earliest opportunity. I allowed the actors to move and improvise, creating possibilities for blocking, based on what they felt their characters would do, to be later coupled with the practical realities of the locations. Whilst it has always been important to regard the script as the bible and utterly respect it as a source of information and guidance, I allowed a certain amount of improvisation. No script is ever incapable of being improved upon, especially when one factors in the influences and capabilities of professional actors. So, a certain amount of improvisation was entertained.



Film still, *The Good Cop*

Some of that improvisation made it into the final film. The scene in the corridor, where Chief Paasila ends by hitting the gold ball towards Lassi, changed when Matti Mäntylä, following his instincts, decided to leave the shot and simply walk away from the scene. That gesture was unexpected and hit the right note in terms of pressing on Lassi the seriousness of the situation. Also, we could cut it together so that Lassi is left abandoned and alone, holding the flag.

Timing, Instinct and the Straight Man

What comes to comedy, the burden of responsibility falls squarely on the shoulders of the director. The actor's job is to be in the moment, which means giving their whole being to the character. When an actor is in this zone, they cannot be watching themselves. It is always imperative that the actor stay in character and live that role as fully, with as complete an emotional range as they live their own life. Just as I sit here writing, I don't stop to ask myself "Am I believable enough at being Christopher Smith when I'm doing this?" so the actor shouldn't question their own believability in their role when playing it.

It's the job of the director to look for that honesty and to make the necessary adjustments that help bring about the right performance, which is to say one that is both compelling and in line with what's needed to tell the story.

Even still, a certain amount of comedy timing, or instinct, is to be greatly appreciated on the part of the comedy director. If an actor has that ability to make you laugh, it's the job of the director to harness that for the final performance.

With one actor in particular, Erkki Airikkala, I found great comic potential. As we rehearsed his scenes in the build-up to shooting, I gave him permission to interpret the character with as free hands as possible. I wrote Sven the Swede as a blunt caricature of how Finns see Swedes, so the potential for comic exaggeration was already in-built.

I always give actors permission to say the lines as naturally as possible and not be too tied to the script that they have to enunciate every word, unless the story absolutely requires it. With that space for flexibility and improve within the frames of the narrative needs, Erkki produced an exceptionally take on the Sven character.



Film still, *The Good Cop*

In the original script, the scene where Sven talks to the policemen includes this exchange:

SVEN

I love dogs. I am a dog person.
Cats? I have no time for. Dogs, I
love.

OTTO

Look, that's all very
interesting... Sir. But why are
you telling us? We're very busy.

Sven stands straight and looks around at the empty
countryside.

The rehearsal process and that freedom to play with the roles resulted in a much more comical exchange. Sven elaborates on being a dog person, literally turning into a kind of Dog Person and actually barking. Then when Otto stops him to comment “That’s all very interesting... Sir” Sven interjects with his own comment, a very solemn “Yes”: at the same time locking in his own take on the importance of being a Dog Person and comically misinterpreting Otto’s sarcastic comment for a serious one.

No matter how many times I watch that scene, I still laugh at that detail. Partly, this is because I know it wasn't in the script and so has come from the flexibility in the rehearsal process and partly just because it's just funny. Also, there's a truth in it, a truth that comes from the character.

The Straight Man is a stock character from the comedy genre whose principal job it is to set up the comedy line of action in another actor. Judith Weston uses the example of Dan Ackroyd's role in early *Saturday Night Live* (1975 – present day) as a classic example, where he was there primarily to set up John Belushi and Bill Murray for their funny moments.

It is not, however, a fixed concept. I never considered at any stage that any one character in my film, possibly with the exception of Sven the Swede, is a hard constant source of comedy above and beyond the functions of other characters. I found myself with the more fluid notion that any character can contain their own sense of comedy and would have the opportunity to be funny. I never impressed on my actors that specific scenes were funny for specific reasons and that one person had a joke they had to nail.

The job of comedy director here is very straightforward: allow the actors to play their parts in the moment and leave their egos at the door. It cannot be seen as a competition to see who is the funniest. Each actor should give the others room to do their bit and be as funny as they see fit.

Keeping it real

Judith Weston, in her influential book *Directing Actors*, implores the comedy director to keep it real. "*Comedy, like drama,*" Weston tells us, "*is best achieved when actors concern themselves with the moment-by moment rather than the effect.*"²⁸ To pick apart what Weston means here gives insights into both the craft of acting and that of working to create comedy.

If an actor performs a piece of business during rehearsals which gets a laugh, such as picking up a banana accidentally when she should have picked up a ringing phone, the motivation of that action for the character has to remain the same. The action has to be an attempt to pick up the phone and not an attempt to make people laugh. The humour came in the first place from the sincere intention to answer the phone, not from an intention to be funny.

²⁸ Weston, 1996, p. 296

Similarly with dialogue: *“If the lines are funny, they come out funnier when the intention is more important than the lines. If the actor’s subtext is “Look how funny this line is,” the fun is gone.”*²⁹

Listening provides a dual function in respect of believable, engaging performance and specifically comedy. When actors genuinely listen to each other, we can see that in their face. If they are not listening to what the other is saying, why should the audience care? That act of listening, digesting and responding can also help a certain type of comedy to work. When there’s a pause between lines, when the actors give that few milliseconds more room, the audience also has time to work out what is funny, digest that joke, respond (either though laughing outwardly or inwardly) and then be ready for the next bit.

On the shoot

Tight parameters were set into the way we worked on the days of shooting due to time constraints and the use of film instead of shooting digitally. In effect, those limitations meant that we had to do all last minute rehearsals on the morning of each shoot for 45-60 minutes after the cast had changed into their costumes and then when on set, doing enough run-throughs between setting up shots and in front of the camera before we started shooting. Even still, the time constraints meant we could normally only perform one run through before we would have to shoot.

Shooting on film is significantly more expensive than shooting digitally. What extra outlay there is for the stock is also multiplied by the development in post-production. Operating on a very tight budget, we never had the luxury of keeping the camera rolling and playing round with variations. Each shot had to be meticulously planned and executed, preferably first time. This, in effect, meant two things: firstly that we had to have done enough in rehearsal so that the actors knew what I wanted from them and secondly, there was a small bit of extra pressure on them to produce the goods first time. I never felt that this pressure produced anything other than appropriately sharp performances.

²⁹ Weston, 1996, p. 294



On set, picture by J. Keinonen

The only time we broke this rule was in shooting the girl, Pipsa. On set, as we went through rehearsals, she started to sign-post emotions rather than actually have them. There wasn't time to get heavily involved in acting method with her, so the solution was to not inform her that we were actually shooting certain things. I simply asked her to stand there for a bit and look over there. I asked my AD, the sound recorder and the cinematographer to refrain from making any statements like "Quiet on set" or "Camera ready", and we just got Pipsa naturally standing and looking at something. All we had to do then was to wait for the right moment when she had an expression on her face that matched what her character would be feeling as closely as possible. In the end, I was happy with the results.

6.

Conclusion

From the outset, I aimed to hold up to the light the realities of what it means to write and direct short film comedy from the position of a first time, independent film maker. An examination of the philosophy of comedy has brought to light fundamental realisations about the nature of how comedy can work in terms of creating the desired tone and reaching the audience.

Film comedy in the short form can provide a solid and accessible base from which to put across a message and tell a story. The ability of humour to give us what Critchley³⁰ calls a *Martian view* of the world is a unique and powerful tool at the film-makers disposal. We are invited to see the world from a different perspective, to laugh at the ridiculousness of it all and to experience our own shift in consciousness. It can be, all at once, enlightening, emboldening, challenging and entertaining.

As soon as one starts talking about the generic definitions of film comedy, there are difficulties to be encountered as in any discussion of genre. The subjectiveness apparent in what individuals find funny clouds the issue. Robert McKee's strict take on what constitutes comedy writing is not to be taken lightly, but at the same time, we would do well to have a more catholic approach to our definition. Comedy in film is a broad church which welcomes almost any film of any genre with strong ambitions to use the comedic tool to tell its story.

The audience can decide if something is funny but the film maker can decide if it is comedy.

There are significant practical implications for the aspiring comedy film-maker. The first of which, to echo the thoughts of Harold Ramis, places the utmost importance on the writing. Like any film, the writing is ultimately the foundation upon which the film will rest. Get the basics right, create compelling characters, put momentum and conflict into the narrative, do the research and rewrite until you cannot rewrite any more.

Comedy retains those very basic principles of any dramatic narrative. The challenges and goals of the characters have to compel, otherwise the comedy is meaningless.

³⁰ Critchley, 2002

For directing the performance, it has become apparent how much significance is to be placed on the rehearsal period. Developing character and finding those golden moments of comedy takes time. On the set, there isn't that time. The set is where all the hard work in rehearsals comes to fruition. The independent film maker does not, ordinarily, have the luxury of time and resources to play around with things in that forum.

There's no denying that making a film is hard. One simply cannot understate just how much work goes into a short film production in terms of time, personnel, know-how and energy. Having the right people around you is going to make life a lot easier.

The writing should afford you the flexibility to stretch your imagination and tell the story you absolutely want to tell. You don't want to have to think about practical problems, like locations and props, and so when it comes to the production, you must have on board the kinds of people who will rise to the challenge to make that written world a reality for the film. One never wants to hear 'No' on a film set. If something cannot be done, it must be presented as other options.

Lastly, there must be a working method which allows for open, productive communication. Judith Weston talks about playable direction in *Directing Actors*³¹. This is the method of giving an instruction that someone can follow, as opposed to describing a result you want, without saying how to achieve that result. Don't ask someone to be happy or angry, help them to achieve those emotions for real.

The same goes for dealing with any aspect of the film production. One must tell stories to all members of the crew to help them understand fundamentally what kind of story you are trying to create. It's much more productive to tell the costume designer all about the character's backstory than just say "I want him to look hard". Definitions of 'hard' change from one person to the next. Facts about personal history cannot be misunderstood.

The short comedy film is an art form capable of delivering something honest and meaningful and well within the grasp of the independent film-maker. Emphasis on writing, working methods, rehearsals and having the right kinds of people involved helps ensure that when the ball is passed, it comes back.

³¹ Weston, 1996

Appendices:

In this section you can find the synopsis for the production, *The Good Cop*, and the actual shooting script.

The script you find here is the one we shot with and so is slightly different from what you can see in the final version of the film in certain respects.

The single biggest difference is that all the dialogue, except that involving the Sven character, was translated into Finnish and then, following on from discussions with the actors and through improvisation in rehearsals, some of that was amended to suit rhythm, comedic timing and actor preferences.

Otherwise, the most noteworthy changes that happened during the production and post-production were the cutting short of scene three, in order to make the tempo clip along faster near the start and avoid repetition as well as a rewrite on the last part of dialogue that Lassi tells to the chief in the final scene.

After shooting that scene on day three of four, I felt that it hit the wrong note. I decided that I should rewrite that dialogue to help the actor Ville Kiljunen to convey his disappointment and reinforce his own philosophy towards life in the face of the Chief's antics.

Also, by that stage, it had been discussed that he would not leave his gun lying on the ground, so he doesn't drop it there, as it originally written.

Originally, the dialogue read:

Lassi looks at the Chief.

LASSI

The world is a wonderful place to be, Chief. It's truly the best of all possible worlds. But that doesn't mean we shouldn't try to make it even better.

Lassi drops his gun on the ground and picks up the dog.

The rewritten scene reads:

Lassi turns his body to fully face Paasila and Sven.

LASSI
(with anger in his voice)
No. No. You don't do this. Not
like this.

Lassi looks at the dog and back at Paasila.

LASSI
The world is a beautiful place.
It is the best of all possible
worlds. But it IS important that
we still try to make it better.

Lassi bends down and picks up the dog.

Synopsis

Lassi is a policeman working in rural Finland with his partner, Otto. Lassi is the much more positive of the two and when a charismatic new police chief comes to town, things look to be danger of unraveling for him as the new boss suspects he is too positive to the job of a policeman as we see in a series of flashbacks.

Whilst sitting on patrol in the bleak winter countryside, a stranger, Sven from Sweden, appears and tasks Lassi and Otto with the job of killing off a dog that he accidentally hit with his car. Called to action, the officers investigate.

Upon arrival at the scene of the accident, they make their way to the nearest farmhouse to inquire about what the owner wants done with his fatally wounded pet. There they find a little girl who loves her dog and the father who isn't at all bothered about its demise as he can get a new one next week.

Returning to the scene, the officers look upon the injured animal and Lassi resolves to put it out of its misery by shooting it. Otto turns to see the farmer's girl watching by the road and races to avert her eyes from the traumatic scene.

Just then, the Swede's car pulls up. Out steps Sven and Chief Paasila, full of smiles. The chief explains that the whole thing was set up to test Lassi and see if he had what it takes to be a real police officer. The dog's predicament was only down to sedatives and pasta sauce, doubling as blood.

Lassi rejects the Chiefs methods as being the wrong way to do things. He lectures him on how the world is, in fact, the best of all possible places and how that doesn't mean we cannot still make it better. Lassi picks up the dog and returns it to the girl, held in Otto's arms.

Otto has his partner back and the world is returned to rights.

Script

FADE IN

1. EXT. DISUSED PETROL STATION FORECOURT - DAY

An empty expanse of cement in a disused petrol station forecourt. On the border between the station and the unruly grass sits a billboard advertising sign. Time has stripped the sign of its purpose, no longer is the name of the company visible, only the product. Sausages.

NARRATOR

The universe is an amazing place.
Here is the planet Earth. A place
of wonder.

A police car drifts into view, crawling along the forecourt. A POLICEMAN, overweight and out of shape, ambles after the car, smoking a cigarette.

NARRATOR

The people that live on this
planet are in a position to be
positive, for it is the only
world they will ever live in.
Other worlds are not a
possibility for them.

The police car grinds to a halt, facing the road at a slight angle. The policeman eventually catches up, turns and leans on the side of the car, his back on the door. He looks at the cigarette in his hands.

NARRATOR

It is, in fact, the Best of
All Possible Worlds.

The SIREN of the police car WAILS for a second and the smoking policeman jumps in fright.

OTTO

Bloody hell, Lassi! I nearly
shit my pants.

Uncontrolled laughter comes from inside the police car.

NARRATOR

Welcome to this world.

2. INT. POLICE CAR, DISUSED PETROL STATION FORECOURT - DAY

Two policemen sit in the front of the police car. LASSI, tall, lean, with a look of wonder in his eye. OTTO, a human walrus, sits in the passenger seat and fidgets. Parked in the forecourt, they command a good view of the adjacent motorway. No houses can be seen, just trees. And road. And more trees. This is the Finnish countryside.

LASSI

It's a beautiful day, Otto.

OTTO

(scanning the skies)

No it isn't. It'll rain later.

LASSI

Well, who said rain isn't beautiful?

OTTO

Me. You have to clean your ears. I SAID
YOU HAVE TO...

A car whizzes by at speed. Otto checks the speedometer, sits up and looks at Lassi.

LASSI

(chuckling)

Calm down.

Lassi rearranges the radio receiver on the dashboard slightly, making the straight edges line up. Otto reaches forward and nudges it ever so slightly, returning it to the previous askew angle.

Lassi smiles at Otto.

A LOCAL OLD MAN in a baseball cap appears on the road, on a creaking old bike. He squeaks as he makes his stuttering progress, but smiles at the officers and waves. Lassi waves back and Otto rolls his eyes.

OTTO

Did you go and see the new guy?

LASSI

I sure did. And he was a very
nice man.

3. INT. POLICE STATION, CHIEF'S OFFICE - DAY

A golf tee, minus a golf ball, stands jammed into the floor of the office. The NEW CHIEF stands over the tee and lines up his shot. Lassi stands behind him and watches eagerly. The Chief swings his club, looks off into the

near wall, and waits whilst the ball in his imagination lands in his imaginary course.

CHIEF PAASILA

Fuck!

Lassi looks over his shoulder and puffs out his cheeks.

CHIEF PAASILA

Lassi?

LASSI

Yes, Chief?

CHIEF PAASILA

How long have I know you?

Lassi checks his watch.

LASSI

Just under one min-

CHIEF PAASILA

-You know, Lassi, I'm a pretty good judge of character. You, my lad, are not a police man.

Lassi looks at his own police uniform hanging off him and self-consciously picks at it.

LASSI

Oh, but Chief, yes. Yes, I am.

Lassi reaches to the desk and surreptitiously straightens some papers.

CHIEF PAASILA

Thanks. Are you, Lassi? Are you really

LASSI

Yes.

CHIEF PAASILA

Well, let me be the judge of that!

Chief Paasila takes the club into his hands again and makes for another swing.

The Chief pulls back, steadies and swings.

4. INT. POLICE CAR, DISUSED PETROL STATION FORECOURT - DAY

Otto looks at his watch. He slumps down a bit more in his seat.

OTTO

And?

LASSI

He was a really nice man.

OTTO

That's all very well, but I'm
not ready to start looking
for a new partner.

5. INT. POLICE STATION, GARAGE - DAY

Chief Paasila stalks through the underground police station garage, golf bag slung over his shoulder. Lassi trots along behind.

CHIEF PAASILA

Now then, I'm told you have a
unique problem that stops you
from doing your job. Do you
know what that problem is?

LASSI

Could it be that I am sometimes
seen as too positive to be a
police officer? Am I right?

CHIEF PAASILA

Hm? Yes. And how do you feel
about that?

Chief Paasila stops and puts the bag down. He carefully selects a club and lines up his next shot. This time, a ball is included in the equation.

LASSI

I understand why my partner
worries. He's always worrying.
I'm certainly not as cynical
as he is.

CHIEF PAASILA

Yes, your partner is worried.
He's worried you'll lose your
job. And in this case he's
right. To be worried.

I'm going to have to find out
for myself.

Chief Paasila swings as Lassi looks on aghast.

6. INT. POLICE CAR, DISUSED PETROL STATION FORECOURT - DAY

The officers sit and quietly look at the road ahead. Lassi takes out his sunglasses, puts them on, checks himself out in the mirror, takes off the glasses and flips the sun visor back up.

At the other end of the forecourt a blue Saab grinds to a halt and a MAN gets out. He moves round to the front of his Saab and checks the bumper. He's sporting a mop of shaggy hair and an orange shirt, too loud for the time and the place.

The officers sit, looking ahead at the road. Otto flips down his own sun visor, scowls and smacks it back up.

Neither officer notices the man from the Saab as he starts edging their way.

7. INT. POLICE STATION, GYM - DAY

Chief Paasila sits on a weight bench. He looks at Lassi, walking on the treadmill, still in his uniform.

CHIEF PAASILA

Lassi, what's your biggest fear?

LASSI

Hm?

CHIEF PAASILA

What does Lassi worry about?

LASSI

Worrying never helps, does it?

CHIEF PAASILA

Sure it does. Sometimes it's healthy to be worried. It keeps you safe. I mean, it keeps you alert to what unpleasant things the world can throw at you.

The Chief's secretary opens the door to the gym and sticks her head around the corner.

SECRETARY

Chief, you have a visitor.

CHIEF PAASILA
Right. Thanks.

Chief Paasila stares at the woman.

CHIEF PAASILA
Ask him to wait in my office.

Again, the chief takes a moment and shuts his eyes.

CHIEF PAASILA
Eeeeeeva!

The secretary shuts the door.

CHIEF PAASILA
I always remember names.

Some outside help to get
this place in order.

LASSI
"The only thing we have to
fear is fear itself."

CHIEF PAASILA
Rubbish. What would you do if...
you became very ill?

LASSI
Oh, I never get ill...

CHIEF PAASILA
...You lost all your money?

LASSI
It's only money. It's not
important...

CHIEF PAASILA
(clicking his fingers)
...You were attacked by a bear
who ripped off both your arms
and ate them right in front of
you?

LASSI
...Only my arms? Phew! A lucky
escape!

Chief Paasila produces a sand wedge from seemingly
nowhere, locates his ball on the floor and lines up the
next shot. Swing!

8. INT. POLICE CAR, DISUSED PETROL STATION FORECOURT - DAY

KNOCK KNOCK!

Lassi and Otto jump at the man suddenly standing next to the car window.

Lassi regains his composure and presses the button for the window to roll down.

SVEN

(in a thick Swedish accent)
Good afternoon good Finnish
police officers. I am from
Sweden. My name is Sven. I hope
you do speak as well English as
me. I am sorry for the troubling
of you, but I have a... thing.

LASSI

Well, Sven, what can that be?
We're here to help.

SVEN

Well, what it is, it is that I
have hit a... dog. With my car.

LASSI

Sir, that's not a crime, unless
you did so on purpose.

SVEN

I love dogs. I am a dog person.
Cats? I have no time for. Dogs, I
love.

OTTO

Look, that's all very
interesting... Sir. But why are
you telling us? We're very busy.

Sven stands straight and looks around at the empty
countryside.

SVEN

No you are not. Anyway, the dog?
Well, it's not dead.

OTTO

Is that good news or bad news?

SVEN

Bad, I think. I mean, it's in a
bad way and I didn't know what to
do, so I just drove off. Maybe I
should have finished it off?

Maybe it will be OK? But I think
it has to be, how do you say, put
to... made to go to... dead. The
issue is, can you, nice
policemen, please go and check on
it and, um, take care with it?

Otto looks at Lassi and then looks back at Sven.

OTTO

Where?

SVEN

(pointing)

Just about six kilometers along
the road. That way.

9. INT. POLICE STATION, CORRIDOR - DAY

Lassi and Chief Paasila stand on opposite ends of a long
corridor and look at one another for some time. Lassi
holds a flag on a stick in his hand. Chief Paasila holds
his putter.

CHIEF PAASILA

How old are you, son?

LASSI

25.

CHIEF PAASILA

Twenty. Five. Sheesh. When I
was your age...

Lassi nods and straightens the flag.

CHIEF PAASILA

My lad, you have an unusual
condition. I've seen it before,
but never so chronic. You have
a form of extreme positivism.

LASSI

Sounds interesting.

CHIEF PAASILA

Oh, it is. And what it means is
that, in essence, as we can
plainly see, you are very
positive. All the time. About
everything.

Lassi smiles.

CHIEF PAASILA

I don't see that it would necessarily be a problem. In fact, if more people were like you, the world would be a nicer place.

LASSI

Great.

CHIEF PAASILA

There is one downside, though. And it's a big one. I'm not confident you can continue your work as a police officer.

Lassi looks down at his shoes.

LASSI

I like being a police officer. I like to help people.

CHIEF PAASILA

I know that, lad, but it's not that simple. Being a police officer means being a bit nasty sometimes. It's not all looking sexy in a uniform, it is? I mean, sometimes you have to stop bad people from doing bad things.

LASSI

People aren't bad.

CHIEF PAASILA

Fine. But you can't deny that some people do bad things. And sometimes to stop them you have to be... not very nice.

LASSI

I believe that people can be better and being understanding and nice will help.

CHIEF PAASILA

That's very noble. But unfortunately, the rest of the world disagrees with you.

I'm sorry, Lassi, I don't think you can continue as an officer of the law. But, I'm not 100 percent decided yet. I still have to think about it.

Chief Paasila lines up the put. Practices the movement.
Swings. The balls sails straight towards Lassi with speed.

10. EXT. HIGHWAY - DAY

The police car pulls up at the edge of the quiet road,
perfectly in line with the white road markings. Lassi and
Otto get out of the car in synchronized fashion.

A gust of wind rushes through the trees by the side of the
road.

The officers edge along the road and stop, looking down at
something. THE DOG. A quiet moaning sound is heard. The
dog doesn't move much and there's clearly a lot of blood
underneath it.

LASSI
What do you think?

OTTO
I think that guy was a fucking
weirdo.

LASSI
About the dog?

OTTO
I don't know. Looks pretty bad.

Otto looks around and spots something just off the road.
He heads in that direction. Lassi follows behind.

11. EXT. FARMHOUSE FRONT DOOR - DAY

The door opens and a LITTLE GIRL stands there. She holds a
large toy dog in her arms.

MARIA
Hello.

LASSI
Hi there little girl. Do you have
a dog?

MARIA
(glancing at the dog in her
arms)
Yes.

OTTO

Hm, yes, and that's a lovely dog.
But we mean a real dog.

MARIA

What? He is real.

MARIA lifts the dog up towards the officers. She turns its head so it looks at each one in turn. Otto reaches out to pat the dog and it goes WOOF!, causing him to jump back.

OTTO

Look. Do you have a r-e-a-l dog?
You know what we mean.

MARIA

Yes, we have a r-e-a-l dog. How
did you know that? DAAAAD!

Just then the girl's FATHER comes to the door. Shirtless,
but enough dirt to suggest his work as a farmer.

PEKKA

Hm?

MARIA

These policemen are asking about
Seven.

Lassi looks at his watch.

MARIA

That's the name of our dog. You
didn't know that!

LASSI

Seven.

PEKKA

We live next to the road.

PEKKA produces a sausage from behind his back and takes a large bite.

LASSI

Look, I'm sorry to have to say
this so bluntly, but we maybe
don't have much time. Your dog,
Seven?, has been in an accident
and we need you to decide what
should be done with it. It's
still just alive, but do you want
it to be, um, put to sleep or...?

Maria's mouth opens and she looks at her Dad with wide eyes.

PEKKA
"Sleep". We'll get a new one next
week. Eight.

Pekka looks over the officers' shoulders, at their car.

PEKKA
(pointing with the sausage)
Car okay?

MARIA
Daddy!

LASSI
Oh, it wasn't us that did it.
We're just...

Otto looks at Maria and reaches out to pet the toy dog in
her arms.

PEKKA
Can I get you anything?

OTTO
Nope.

PEKKA
A drink? Something to eat? A good
weapon?

LASSI
No thanks.

PEKKA
Right. Thanks boys.

Pekka ushers Maria inside and closes the door, leaving the
officers standing on the porch.

OTTO
Now I'm feeling sinister.

12. EXT. HIGHWAY - DAY

The officers stand over the dog and look at one another.
Lassi pulls out his baton. He flicks it out to full
length.

OTTO
Hey, come on, Lassi.

Otto puts his hand on Lassi's shoulder and gives it a
squeeze.

OTTO
Hey, I'll call it in. Put the
baton away.

Lassi folds back in his baton and puts it back into the
holster.

Lassi pulls out his gun.

LASSI
Gun's better. It's the right
thing to do.

Otto lifts his radio to his mouth. Otto turns and looks
towards the house. Maria stands in the yard, looking at
the officers with her toy dog held tight.

Otto replaces his radio and starts moving towards the
girl.

OTTO
Hey! Girl, hold on!

Just as Lassi steadies his aim on the dog, the blue Saab
pulls up behind the police car.

Lassi re-tightens his grip on his pistol and raises it
once more. He slowly takes aim and readies himself for the
impact.

Otto leaps over the junk in the garden.

Lassi takes a deep breath, closes his eyes... and let's
out a primal roar:

LASSI
GGGGGGggggggggNNNNNnnnnnaaAARRGGG!!!

Otto reaches Maria in time, picks her up and turns her
gaze away from the road.

HONK HONK!

Chief Paasila steps out of the car with Sven and they move
towards Lassi.

LASSI
Chief?

CHIEF PAASILA
Hi there, Lassi. You're probably
wondering what I'm doing here.
Hm?

Lassi stands straight with mouth open.

CHIEF PAASILA

This gentleman here is my
associate from Sweden. He's here
to help out.

SVEN

Hiedo. The dog's fine. It's just
bolognese sauce and sedatives.

Sven pulls a pill bottle from his pocket and helpfully
waves it about.

CHIEF PAASILA

"Positive Lassi". You were really
going to kill the dog, huh? Very
impressive. Maybe you are a
police officer. What do you say?

Lassi looks at the Chief.

LASSI

The world is a wonderful place to
be, Chief. It's truly the best of
all possible worlds. But that
doesn't mean we shouldn't try to
make it even better.

Lassi drops his gun on the ground and picks up the dog.

The Local Old Man cycles past again, this time in the
other direction and he waves again. Lassi is the only one
who acknowledges him.

Otto, watching on with Maria in his arms, turns her head
to see Lassi coming their way with Seven.

OTTO

It's OK. He'll be OK. For a
while.

FADE OUT

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